

## Chapter 1

# Our Father Who Art in Heaven

### *The Search*

*Lord, I weary of life,  
My throat grows hoarse  
trying to shout above the waves,  
the howling sea deafens me.*

*Lord, this life tires me so,  
and the universe drowns me.*

*Lord, you left me alone,  
all alone in this lonely sea.*

*Or you and I are playing  
hide and seek, Lord,  
or the voice with which I call  
is really your voice.*

*Everywhere I look for you  
but never seem to find you,  
yet on all sides I encounter you  
just for having gone a-searching.*

—Antonio Machado (Spanish poet, 1875–1939)

Fernando Silva is the director of the children's hospital in Managua, Nicaragua. On Christmas Eve, he was working late. Fireworks were already going off in the streets, lighting up the night sky. He was anxious to head home, where family celebrations awaited him. One more quick pass through the wards and he would be on his way. That's when he sensed that someone was following along behind him. They were soft, padded steps, barely audible to the ear. Turning around, Fernando saw that it was one of the child patients, one who was all alone. He recognized the little boy's face, touched as it was by the pallor of an incurable disease. Those beseeching eyes seemed almost apologetic, seeking permission to

come closer. Fernando stood still, allowing the boy to come up to him, brush his hand, and murmur, "Tell . . . tell someone, I'm here."<sup>1</sup>

The loneliness of this child who was overcome by illness and suffering the pangs of a not-too-distant demise illustrates the sorrowful reality of every soul on our condemned world in this dark corner of the universe. This is the unfolding drama of the human race.<sup>2</sup> The cry of that child from Managua is the cry of all humanity. It is your plea and mine: "Tell someone we're here."<sup>3</sup>

The child from Managua reveals a fundamental human need: we are all in need of paternal care. This applies to the natural order as well as to the supernatural one; it is true psychologically just as it is spiritually.

The father figure is vital in the story of every man and woman. The ability to resolve conflicts springs largely from a child's relationship with his or her parents, and this plays a huge role in determining life's destiny. The father is not merely the one who gives us life, he is the one who protects us and gives us a sense of security. Parenting is not merely a biological act; it is fundamentally affective. Many men have children but are not truly parents. It is a fact that when the man who transmits life disappears, it becomes imperative to one's heart to replace him with some other adult who can pass on human values. An absent father produces in his child a fatherless emptiness. He or she grows up with a constant feeling of vulnerability and defenselessness. The child feels somehow responsible and guilty for causing the father to leave; thus, childhood and youth are spent struggling to be good enough to regain the acceptance and love of the father who deserted the child. Subsequently, this mechanism is transferred on to other relationships, and life becomes all the more an uphill battle. Yet where one fatherless child is unable to cope, another manages to forge ahead.

My father left home when I was five years old. I can truthfully say that my childhood was, to a large degree, consumed by the search for a paternal role model, for an adult who could operate with the force of law. I remember discussing this with my mother when I was a child. A couple of times I suggested to her men who seemed to be attractive and nice. I wanted to convince her to remarry, that she might bring home someone good, because we needed that. But she never did remarry.

In my fatherless state, our neighborhood became like a family to me, the place closest to my affections. Far from uncles and cousins, those neighbors became my loved ones. Their homes were where I spent most of my childhood hours. My neighborhood is at the source of my deepest feelings. It was my world and my place of support on earth. The community that surrounds a child, together with the family, is the originating horizon where the threads begin to intertwine to set the course for life's unfolding story. And there, very close to me in that

neighborhood, was the seed of Christian faith that germinated in my mother and, in turn, would mark my destiny.

Across the street lived Dr. Landoni, a physician with a silver mane of hair, an elegant man with a serene gaze. His wife, a plump and charming woman, dedicated herself completely to her family. They had two children, a boy and a girl who was my age. Watching her leave each morning for school was like an awakening for me. Her blond hair, which fell to her waist; her gentle blue eyes; and her gazellelike steps stirred in me a rush of inner energy, the zest of the beginning of a crush. But she was an unreachable princess.

The next-door neighbor to the left of our apartment was a man by the name of Demarco, an Italian man whose wife, when he wasn't seen for a period of time at his usual haunts, would say he was "on vacation." Although the other neighbors said he was in jail.

A couple of houses farther down Peter Campbell Street, there was a cheap hotel where two prostitutes, Betty and Gloria, lived. They were sort of a stigma in that middle-class neighborhood. Betty's and Gloria's sons were my buddies, Enrique and Bobby, who in our playful Hispanic way, we nicknamed "Bobo" (which would be like calling someone a dimwit or a goof in English). Both of them were good and supportive friends.

Farther up the street, near Rivera Avenue, lived the Bojorge family. Their son William to this day is still my friend. His dad was the director of the British School. William played rugby with the Old Boys team at the British School; they were the classic adversaries of another team called Old Christian. It was this latter team, as you may recall, that was featured in the famous *Alive: The Story of the Andes Survivors*. On October 13, 1972, the Uruguayan military plane carrying them to Santiago, Chile, crashed high up in the mountains. Only sixteen of those boys, out of all the passengers and crew, survived. They were rescued on December 23 of that same year. What a miraculous Christmas gift that was for those families, especially for the renowned painter Carlos Páez Vilaró, who never abandoned hope during the search for his son. After more than two months, the press presumed them all dead, but not so for Páez Vilaró. I still remember that father's face the day he embraced his rescued son.

Right next to our apartment there was a popular sports center called Campbell Street Bowling. In the back of that establishment, there was a small apartment with walls adjacent to ours. It was a kind of hideout where delinquents could flee to avoid being captured by the police. The night before he was shot, a notorious criminal named Mincho Martincorena went into hiding there. His assaults caused serious havoc in Montevideo. The neighbors came up with a ditty after his demise: "Martincorena, unfit to live, died riddled like a sieve."

Right in front of our apartment lived Amanda, the piano teacher. I don't know if she was truly ugly or if my frustration with learning to play that instrument made me see her that way. Memories can sometimes be apocryphal. But she was a good person with infinite patience. I spent the most torturous hours of my childhood during those unwelcome classes. I hated those classes, which my mother paid for from the small housecleaning salary she earned. My mother always said that education was the only way out of poverty, which, ever since my father had left us, seemed as if it had taken up residence with us on a no-eviction basis. My mother bought us books with much hard work and sacrifice, telling us that a child who reads becomes an adult who thinks.

My memory takes me to apartment 2, adjoining ours, with which we shared a common hallway that led to an open-air courtyard, which was sixteen feet long by thirteen feet wide. It was like a dirt square with brick walls ten feet high that separated our unit from the neighbors'. There was one lone pine tree in that space; I watched its growth over time, always elegant, reaching up toward the sun. Nature always offers an encouraging message of hope. There was also enough space for my mother to raise a few chickens, whose eggs added a bit to our household finances. I will hold off telling you for now about the family who lived in apartment 2. First, I want to focus on something else.

### **“Who art in heaven”**

On the back wall of our apartment, overlooking the shared courtyard, someone had installed iron steps leading up to the roof deck. When things got bad for me “down on earth,” I would climb up there to take refuge under that space of open sky. I would spend hours on the rooftop deck looking at the sky. On sunny afternoons, my gaze would follow the passing clouds as they seemed to make their way through a predetermined course, and especially on summer nights, I would climb up there to gaze at the starry sky.

The earth is our unique habitat in the universe. It is our foothold and place of support. Everything that moves on this planet has the earth as a point of reference: just as a river flows according to the lay of the land, giving it a channel and direction, we can make all our movements thanks to the firmness and the support of the ground beneath our feet. In addition, the land we occupy is nourishing. The Creator determined that from the earth would come our sustenance (Genesis 3:17), and to it we return at death, because “you are dust, and to dust you shall return” (verse 19).

But sometimes the earth beneath our feet behaves strangely: it moves beneath our feet, provoking a certain degree of terror. This is true both literally and metaphorically. Earthquakes occur not only in physical geography but in the human

geography as well. Suddenly, we realize that the ground on which we tread is not as firm as we believed it to be.

On those days when the earth “moved” underneath my feet, I would turn to the heavens and climb up to heaven, that place that is never shaken or moved. The earth would move beneath my feet when the “war of the sexes” intensified, meaning the heated conflicts between my mother and father. And that overarching heaven offered me a great escape.

Heaven is the earth’s ultimate foundation: in its remoteness and infinite distance, it envelops us, and its fixed stars guide us toward the glory of the Creator. Just as the stars guided the Magi from the East on their way to Bethlehem, heaven also guides you when you get lost on earth. This is true in the natural order of things as well as in the spiritual. The heavens provide us with a map. On the days of anguish, the rooftop deck of our apartment was my calm refuge. In those moments, the earth was nothing more than a fleeting ship that moved through space, and the heavens above an infinite place of security.

The Bible declares that “the heavens are telling the glory of God; and the firmament proclaims his handiwork” (Psalm 19:1). The immense depth of a star-studded night reveals the infinitude in which our world seems to be lost. In their profoundness, the heavens pull us out of the confines of our limited human existence, while at the same time allowing us to loosen the bonds of life’s anxiety in order to perceive the footprint of the Eternal. When the anxieties and worries of your daily existence feel like they have a stranglehold on you, keep calm, look up, and contemplate the starry heavens. You will return to your everyday world renewed.

At the same time, there is another essential characteristic of heaven: from it emanates time as a dimension in which our past, present, and future occur. While the earth is where all our daily activities take place, heaven determines when these things take place. To heaven belong the day and the night, light and darkness, and the course of the seasons and years. Immense galactic spiraling accompanied by innumerable solar cycling demarcates for pensive creatures the course of time. Our day and night, light and darkness, seasons and years, are all the interplay of earth with the far beyond. The earth’s rotation on its axis determines the daily rhythm, and the planetary revolutions around the sun determine the annual cycle. In this way, the astral heavens mark the time of our personal existence, while signaling the finitude of our mortal condition.

### **The heaven of heavens**

But the heavenly Father is far beyond and yet closer than the heavens that I could see from my rooftop. “Our” heaven was created during the first week of

Creation (Genesis 1). The Genesis account of the Creation week did not include the heaven where God has dwelt from eternity:

The LORD is in his holy temple,  
the LORD's throne is in heaven;  
his eyes behold, his eyelids test, the children of men (Psalm 11:4).

It was this “third heaven” that the apostle Paul referred to when he wrote, “I know a man in Christ who fourteen years ago was caught up to the third heaven—whether in the body or out of the body I do not know, God knows” (2 Corinthians 12:2).

Referring to the Creator, the psalmist writes,

to him who rides in the heavens, the ancient heavens;  
lo, he sends forth his voice, his mighty voice (Psalm 68:33).

“Whatever the LORD pleases he does, in heaven and on earth” (Psalm 135:6) because to God, there is no difference between heaven and earth. Nothing can contain Him. He exists beyond all creation and beyond space and time, but He enters with sovereignty into our history.

### The search for a Father

We said that the boy from Managua poses the great human need: we are all in need of a father's watch care. This is true both in the natural order as in the supernatural.

I do not think that the absence of my earthly father was the *cause* behind my search for a heavenly Father, but it was the *condition* that opened the way for my encounter with the Lord. *Cause* and *condition* are not interchangeable terms. What causes water to boil is the fire; the boiling condition of the water is all about the pot in which the water boils. The initial circumstances of my life were what set me on a course for an eventual encounter with God.

Doesn't it sometimes happen that when you walk down memory lane you see flashbacks like paintings on a wall more or less in an ordered sequence? It almost seems like someone placed them that way intentionally. Could it be that there is a superior Intelligence that is made known in the grandeur of nature and in the way certain circumstances have come about in your life?

In apartment 2 on Peter Campbell Street lived a midwife named Margarita, to whom my mother turned in the wee hours one fall morning when it was time to give birth to me. Alone and bearing her intense pain, with no time to rush

to the hospital, all Mother could do was pound on the adjacent wall and shout for someone to come right over to help her. Margarita answered the call, and at 3:00 A.M. a cry was heard that echoed down the hallway in that old building on Campbell Street. Mother said that I let out a wail of surprise when I arrived. And life has never failed to surprise me since then.

Margarita had a husband, who was an army captain; he was a frugal man of few words but known for his generous heart. My brother promptly nicknamed him Papa Flores. That family practically became my brother's second home. By God's gracious design, Papa Flores filled the role of surrogate father to my brother during most of his childhood. Pocho and Mima, Papa Flores's children, became like a brother and sister to him.

But the best of what God had in mind for us came from Margarita, the wife and mother of that family. She was a believer and a woman of simple, practical faith. She had a strong sense of service combined with a great love for others. This was not so much expressed in words as in actions. Margarita became a wonderful friend to my mother and planted in her the gospel seed, which in time would germinate within her heart.

### A heavenly Father

When we elevate our hearts to God, we do not direct ourselves to "something," we do not immerse ourselves in some cosmic energy, as Eastern philosophy postulates; neither do we fuse with the "mysterious totality of the universe." We are addressing "Someone," a person. Because the God of the universe is a personal Being who wants to relate with us face to face, He is attentive to the desires and needs of our hearts. Prayer directs us toward that Being who is our beginning and end. The Lord's Prayer begins with an invocation and ends with exaltation to the same Father: the Alpha and the Omega. The beginning and the end of everything. Saint Augustine, in his *Confessions*, wrote, "You have formed us for Yourself, and our hearts are restless till they find rest in You."<sup>4</sup> When we say the word *Father*, we direct our whole being toward the only One who loves us, understands us, and forgives us, because we are His children. In Him, we find the beginning and the end of our lives. In the Lord's Prayer, Jesus uses the Aramaic term *Abba*, a close and intimate way of referring to the Father. It means "Dad" or "Daddy." The word *Father* can sometimes arouse a certain type of fear. But *Abba* is a personal and close Being.

"Our Father who art in heaven" points to the ultimate foundation of this earth, to Someone who is beyond the vicissitudes of the world. It expresses the fact that beyond the happenings of your life there is an infinite God who is not subject to time or sickness or decrepitude and death. He is your mighty fortress

and your refuge in time of trial. You can say with the psalmist,

The LORD is my rock, and my fortress, and my deliverer,  
my God, my rock, in whom I take refuge (Psalm 18:2).

The heavenly Father gives meaning and direction to your steps in this world.  
The Lord says,

I will instruct you and teach you  
the way you should go;  
I will counsel you with my eye upon you (Psalm 32:8).

And even though you don't have a clear vision of Him or you've wandered away from His ways, He will not stop searching for you so that you can have an encounter with Him. In time, you will look back and come to see how the once-scattered dots of your life have become connected to form a picture that makes sense.

Behind the ebb and flow of world events, the rise and fall of empires and nations, there is a God who controls the universe. We have nothing to fear, because

“He changes times and seasons;  
he removes kings and sets up kings;  
he gives wisdom to the wise  
and knowledge to those who have understanding” (Daniel 2:21).

And behind the scenes of your own existence, where events occur of which you are not even aware, God is there at work, designing a future for you:

Yet it was I who taught E'phraim to walk,  
I took them up in my arms;  
but they did not know that I healed them.  
I led them with cords of compassion,  
with the bands of love (Hosea 11:3, 4).

The heavenly Father possesses the key that guards the secrets of your life. He opens and closes in accordance to whether you accept His request to live in you.

Every human tie may perish,  
Friend to friend unfaithful prove,



Mothers cease their own to cherish,  
Heaven and earth at last remove;  
But no changes  
Can attend Jehovah's love.

—Thomas Kelly

## FOR YOUR REFLECTION

1. What does the expression “Our Father who art in heaven” mean to you?
2. Can the absence of an earthly father serve as the *condition* that leads one to seek the heavenly Father?
3. What is Jesus Christ's Father like? Describe Him in your own words.
4. Who are we addressing when we elevate a prayer to God?

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1. Eduardo Galeano, *El libro de los abrazos*.

2. For the believer, life is a drama and not a tragedy. In a drama, the character roles can be altered; while in a tragedy, the characters are predetermined by fate. For that reason, a drama always finds resolution, while a tragedy does not. In tragedies, the key characters always die. The difference between these genres of literature and theater is seen in how the closing scenes play out. Dramas work toward solutions in life, while tragedies do not.

3. It was brought to my attention that the human interest story concerning the little child from Managua left some readers wondering about his cry and whether there was ever a comforting response to ease his loneliness and give him the emotional support and love he needed as he faced his closing scenes. I realize that it may seem to some that my incorporating just a snippet from that child's life—the most emotionally impacting moment of his suffering existence—was, to a degree, philosophically or theologically exploitative. Some readers, I am sure, needed follow-up on that little fellow's “rest of the story.” You and I can connect via the thoughts expressed in this book, and we may do so in the warm comfort of our respective homes, but it would be tragic to lose perspective about the very real suffering of many innocent children and people of all ages in far less pleasant circumstances than we enjoy. It is not just a lonely Christmas Eve for a dying boy in a sterile hospital ward; there are millions of hungry people, war-displaced orphans, and hopeless persons crying out for care, kindness, and the warmth of affection that lasts beyond a fleeting moment in this literary presentation. God knows how the life of that little child in Managua unfolded; He knows as well the far better story prepared for him in the Promised Land. We may not have the possibility of discovering more concerning that particular precious one's closing scenes on earth, or even his name, but God is ready to open before us similar stories where we can each be the answer to a personal cry, one that will not be lost in the great impersonal mass of misfortune.

4. Saint Augustine, *The Confessions*, 1.1.